

## **Skin Color and Perceptions of Ambiguous Aggression**

**Jane C. Anderson**

Undergraduate Student, Psychology

**Erik Feia**

Undergraduate Student, Psychology

**Pauline Ceulemans**

Undergraduate Student, Psychology

**University of Wisconsin-Stout**

### **Skin Color and Perceptions of Ambiguous Aggression**

American society has changed since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law. The desegregation of the United States meant that many white people began to have more contact with black people. The prejudices that white people held toward black people began to fade as they all attended school together, served in the military together, and worked side by side. The recent election of a mixed-race president would seem to indicate that a majority of the country has come to accept black people as equals. But a subtle form of racial stereotyping may still exist. Myers (2008) notes, “We can have different explicit (conscious) and implicit (automatic) attitudes toward the same target (. . .) thus, we may retain from childhood a habitual, automatic fear or dislike of people for whom we now express respect and admiration” (p. 303). The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not the stereotype of Blacks as being more aggressive than Whites still holds.

Stereotyping is a device the mind uses in order to make fast judgments and save mental resources. Research has shown that the mind uses less energy when summoning up a stereotype than when thinking something through (Macrae, 1994). It is a natural behavior; one of the heuristics, or shortcuts, that the mind typically uses. These heuristics happen in the mind so quickly that one is usually unaware of the process. Thus, stereotypes can affect one’s judgments and behaviors without one’s conscious knowledge.

Many people believe that personality traits are fixed, consistent, and therefore predictable (Levy, Stoessner, & Dweck, 1998). This leads people to assume that they know how someone will behave based on their stereotypes of that person. For example, if someone believes that black men are angry and dangerous, they will be afraid of a black man, regardless of his actual personality. Hugenberg and Bodenhausen (2003) found that people who were high in implicit

prejudice saw hostility as appearing more quickly and lingering longer on pictures of the faces of black Americans than on similar white faces.

The effects on others of even implicit prejudice can be devastating. For example, recent studies have shown that the phenomenon known as “stereotype threat” can affect the performance of college students who are being tested (Harrison, Stevens, Monty, & Coakley, 2006). Teachers may not be aware of how their implicit prejudices are affecting the grades of their students. If students can be affected by prejudice from their teachers, they may well be affected by prejudices from their classmates.

How much stereotyping and prejudice remain in our society? The answer differs depending on whom you ask. Whites and Blacks have different perceptions regarding how much progress has been made in racial relations. According to a poll conducted by ABC News and the Washington Post in 2010, when asked "Do you think Blacks have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime?," 40% of Whites and only 11% of Blacks said Blacks have achieved racial equality. Conversely, 32% of Blacks but only 13% of Whites said that they will not see racial equality in their lifetime (ABC Poll, 2010). The difference in perspectives could be due to different reference points. As Eiback and Ehrlinger (2006) found in their research, Whites look at the progress made since the days of slavery and Blacks compare racial progress to what they believe would be ideal. Although there is some evidence that stereotyping can be overcome with practice (Kawakami, Dovidio, Hermsin, & Russin, 2000), other evidence suggests that there is still a White bias against Blacks overall (Dovidio, 2002).

Studies done by Duncan (1976) and by Sagar and Schofield (1980) indicated an overwhelming tendency in the late 1970's and early 1980's to label black males as aggressive or

threatening when performing the same actions that were labeled as playful when performed by white males. In those studies, participants were shown an “ambiguously aggressive” situation in which a white actor shoved or poked a black actor and vice versa. Duncan (1976) used a video in the original study; Sagar and Schofield (1980) used line drawings to reduce possible confounds. When asked to describe the behavior of the actors, more than 80% of the participants in both studies labeled the black actor’s behavior as aggressive and less than 15% labeled the white actor as aggressive. The present study sought to determine whether or not those stereotypes have changed in the last 30 years.

The original hypothesis of previous studies was that the threshold for labeling an act as threatening is lower when viewing a black actor than when viewing a white actor. The present study assumed the same hypothesis: Even though society has changed, there is a difference between the perceived intentions of white and black male actors based on still prevalent implicit stereotypes. Based on recent research, we expected to find a significantly higher level of perceived aggression when students observed a black student performing an ambiguous act versus a white student committing the same act.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were college students from a small midwestern campus. They were enrolled in psychology courses and received course credit for participation. There were a total of 79 participants (24 male, 54 female, and 1 unrecorded). Participants were non-black and primarily white.

### **Materials**

The current materials have been adapted from the work of Sagar and Schofield (1980).

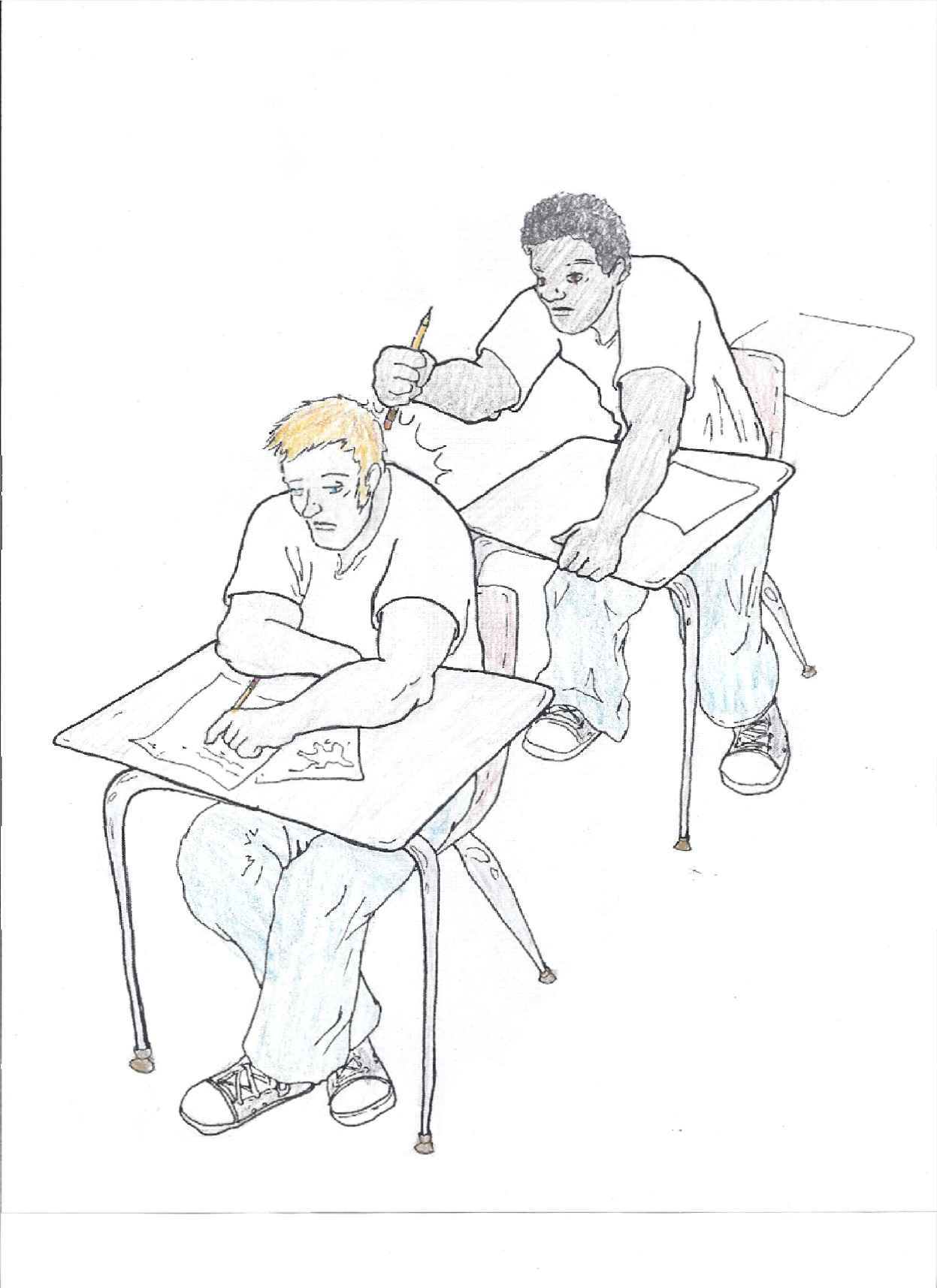
The main adaptation in the current research was to eliminate one of the four pictorial stimuli from Sagar and Schofield's total of four pictures. The independent variable consisted of three colored line drawings<sup>1</sup> that depicted one male student poking another male student in the back with the eraser end of a pencil. The independent variable had three conditions represented by distinct combinations of skin color: White poking White, Black poking White, and White poking Black. A brief vignette was read while the participants viewed one of the three drawings.

“Anthony was sitting at his desk, working on his social studies assignment, when Michael started poking him in the back with the eraser end of his pencil. Anthony just kept on working. Michael kept poking him for a while, and then he finally stopped.”

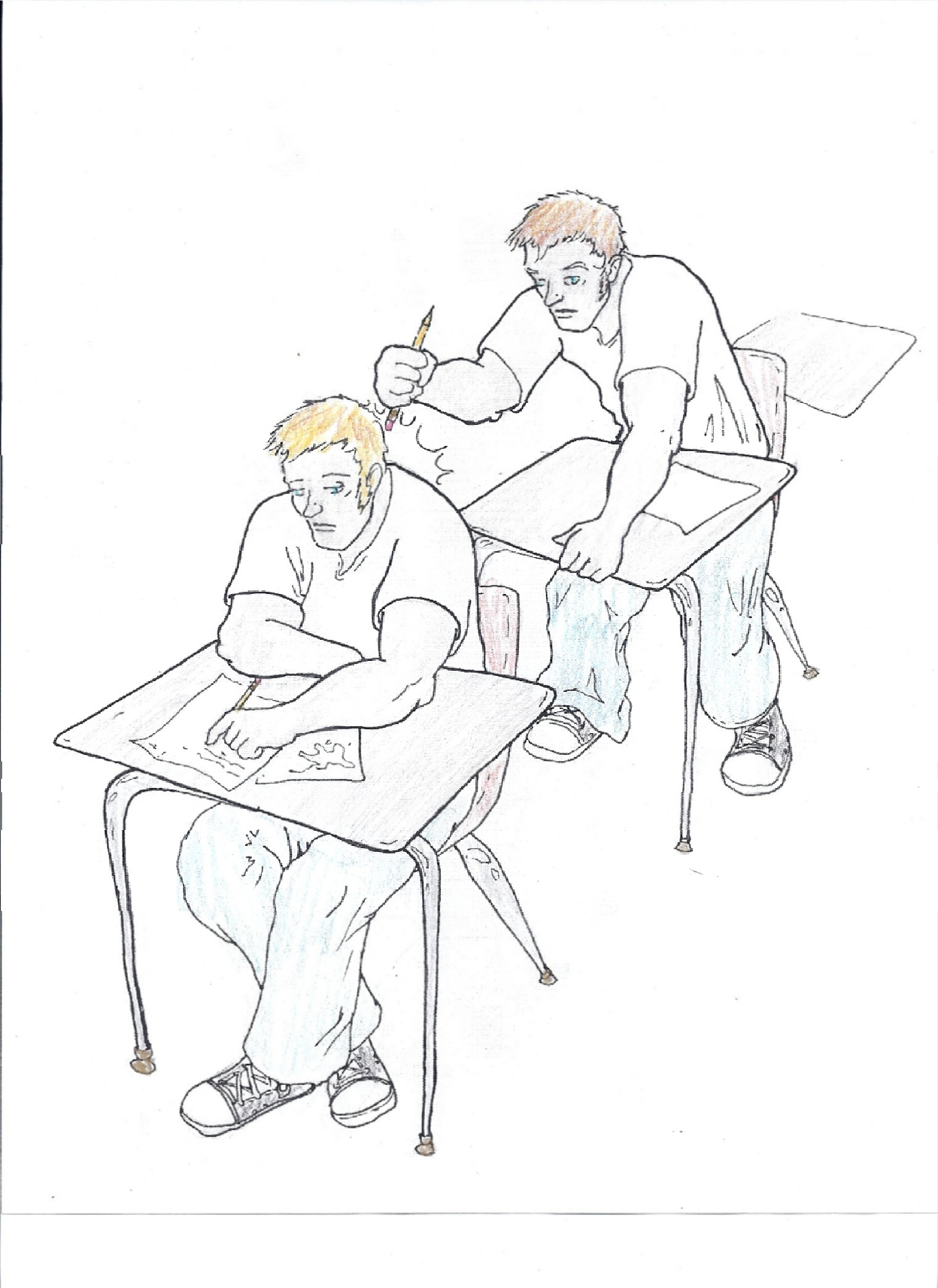
This vignette was chosen from four vignettes used in the original study (Sagar & Schofield, 1980). It was chosen because it is a plausible situation, and in the original study, the participants' responses were not significantly influenced by his or her race. The participants then answered a questionnaire with three demographic questions and ten Likert type questions about participants' perceptions of the behaviors and personalities of the actors. The participants rated the aggressor's behavior by how *playful*, *friendly*, *mean* and *threatening* his actions appeared on a scale from 0 (*does not fit*) to 8 (*perfect fit*). Participants also rated the perceived personality qualities (*thoughtless—considerate*, *strong—weak*, and *threatening—harmless*) of both actors on a scale from 0 to 8. Finally, participants rated their perceptions of how inherently confrontational or non-confrontational the situation was on a scale from 0 to 8.

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Andy Bensen for creating the images that participants viewed in this study.







## Procedure

Upon arrival at the study site, participants were seated at private workstations<sup>2</sup>. Participants were informed that the current research involved interpreting social cues; this deception was employed in attempt to minimize the likelihood of obtaining responses that may not accurately reflect participants' attitudes and stereotypes about skin color. After the participants read and signed a consent form, they were randomly assigned to one of the three skin color conditions: White poking White, Black poking White, and White poking Black. Participants were given an assigned line drawing and a questionnaire. The researchers read the accompanying vignette to participants. No identifying information was recorded. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

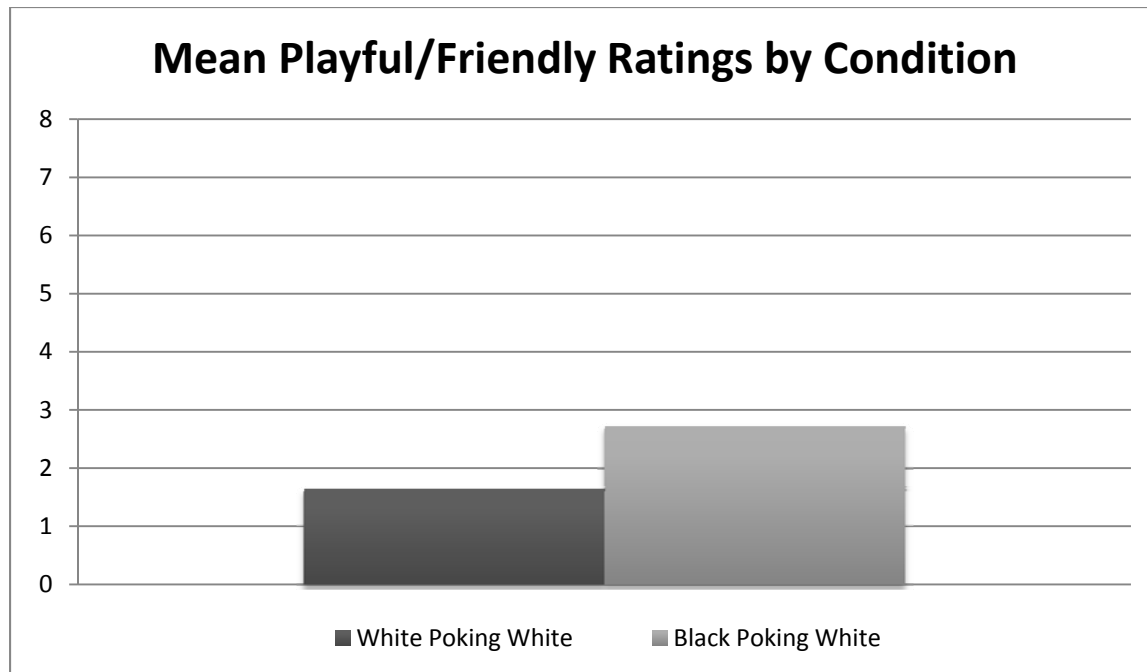
## Results

Following the scoring method of Sagar and Schofield (1980), the behavior ratings for the *threatening* and *mean* items were combined to create one score. Similarly, the behavior ratings for the *friendly* and *playful* items were combined to create one score. To examine whether skin color condition had an effect on participants' perceptions of the behavior as *mean* and *threatening*, a one way ANOVA was conducted. Contrary to expectations, no significant difference was found  $F(2,76) = 1.16, p = .32$ . To examine whether skin color condition had an effect on participants' perceptions of the behavior as *friendly* and *playful*, a one way ANOVA was conducted. Marginal significance was found,  $F(2, 76) = 2.97, p = .057$ . A post hoc comparison using the Fisher LSD test revealed that only the White poking White and Black poking White conditions were significantly different,  $p < .05$ . In other words, a black person

---

<sup>2</sup> We would also like to thank Jonathan Bandy and Brooke Peterson for their help collecting data.

poking a white person ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) was perceived as more *friendly* and *playful* than a white person poking another white person ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ). These results are opposite of the present hypothesis and the findings of Sagar and Schofield (1980). The remaining items measuring perceptions of personality and situation were analyzed using a series of one way ANOVAs. No significant effects were found.



**Figure 1.** Mean Playful/Friendly Ratings by Condition. This figure shows that participants rated a black person poking a white person as more playful and friendly than a white person poking a white person.

### Discussion

The results of the present study refuted the hypothesis that ambiguously aggressive acts would be perceived as more threatening when those acts were performed by a black male than by a white male. Participants' (non-black and primarily white college students) responses showed no significant difference between the three tested conditions for all but one dependent variable. Marginal support for the actions of a black male being perceived as more playful and friendly than the actions of a white male was found; interestingly, this marginally significant finding ran

counter to the tested hypothesis.

There are a number of possible explanations for the outcome of the present research. First and least likely is that culture in the United States has entered a “post-racial” mindset. Recent polling indicates that President Obama’s approval rating among non-whites is around 75% while his approval rating among whites is around 40% (Jones, 2009). This polling suggests that the population is aware of and makes judgments based, in part, on race.

Previous research offers greater insight as to the nature of participants’ perceptions of interpersonal aggression and skin color. Harrison and Esqueda (2001) found that participants viewed aggressive and violent acts performed by white males as being a greater cause for concern than the same acts performed by black males. This is due to stereotypical beliefs about violence and aggression being more commonplace for black males than white males. In other words, seeing a white male acting violently is very concerning because commonly held stereotypes indicate that white males do not normally act that way (Harrison & Esqueda, 2001). This view offers one plausible explanation for why the white actor in the present study was viewed as less playful than the black actor; the black actor, being stereotypically more violent, would have been expected to engage in more violent play.

Although it is contradictory to the current research results, further support for the view that people make judgments based on stereotypes and perceptions of skin color has been found in studies of capital trial outcomes (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006). To summarize, in capital cases black defendants were more likely than white defendants to receive the death penalty; further, black defendants whose faces were more “stereotypically Black” were even more likely to receive the death penalty (Eberhardt et al., 2006, p. 385).

However, the current result of a black actor having been perceived as more playful and

friendly than a white actor also has explanations in the literature. In a study of college students, Judd et al. (2006) found that white participants demonstrated no prejudice or in-group favoritism with respect to black actors. There were at least two possible explanations: (1) White participants felt pressured to conform to egalitarian norms frequently found in college culture and gave socially desirable responses, and (2) white participants, who came from largely politically liberal families, had been conditioned to see members of out-groups as inherently equal and to consider skin color based judgments immoral (Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 2006). Neither of the above two possibilities could be definitively argued (Judd et al., 2006). Similarly, the present research findings also do not have a clear explanation. Further, Singh, Choo, & Poh (2008) found support for the need to preserve a positive self-image and an appearance of political correctness as being the motivating factor for stated perceptions of out-group members rather than a social shift towards egalitarianism. Thus, the uncertainty about the nature of the present results is consistent with the ongoing debate in the literature.

Perhaps the largest limitation related to the study of prejudice through college student samples is the problem of restricted range. This was likely a confounding factor because over-reliance on equality-conscious student samples can have negative consequences on generalizing hypotheses and results to a broader non-student population (Dasgupta & Hunsinger, 2008). It is also likely that participants from the current research were quick to recognize that their perceptions of black people were being measured, thus raising the likelihood of socially desirable responses.

The opportunities to expand and improve the current research are many. Perhaps one of the most important ways to build on the existing results would be to explore whether or not participants are providing socially acceptable responses in response to social and/or internal

(self-image) pressures. One strategy to address this concern would be to lower participants' cognitive processing resources through the use of a cognitive load task immediately before assessing for possible interactions between stereotyping and skin color perceptions. Previous research with this methodology has shown that participants under cognitive load are more likely to make judgments based on affect rather than cognition thus decreasing participants' ability to provide socially desirable responses (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Another consideration for future research involves the correlation between intergroup contact and prejudice levels (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). College campus cultures generally involve more intergroup contact than in society at large and also place increasing normative pressure towards egalitarian principles (Dasgupta & Hunsinger, 2008); as such, there is also value to extending this line of research to non-student samples.

### References

- Dasgupta, N., & Hunsinger, M. (2008). The opposite of a great truth is also true: When do student samples help versus hurt the scientific study of prejudice? *Psychological Inquiry*, *19*, 90-98. doi: 10.1080/10478400802049860
- Dovidio, J. K., Kwakami, K., & Gaertner, S.L. (2002). Implicit and explicit prejudice and interracial interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 62-88. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.82.1.62
- Duncan, B. L. (1976). Differential social perception and attribution of intergroup violence: Testing the lower limits of stereotyping blacks. *Journal of Personality and Social Behavior*, *34*, 590-598.
- Eberhardt, J. L., Davies, P. G., Purdie-Vaughns, V. J., & Johnson, S. L. (2006). Looking deathworthy perceived stereotypicality of black defendants predicts capital-sentencing outcomes. *Psychological Science*, *17*, 383-386. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01716.x
- Eiback, R., & Ehrlinger, J. (2006). Keep your eyes on the prize: Reference points and social differences in assessing progress toward equality. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 66-67. doi: 10.1177/0146167205279585
- Harber, K. D. (1998). Feedback to minorities: Evidence of a positive bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 622-628. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.622
- Harrison, L. A., & Esqueda, C. W. (2001). Race stereotypes and perceptions about black males involved in interpersonal violence. *Journal of African American Men*, *5*, 81-92.
- Harrison, L. A., Stevens, C. M., Monty, A. N., & Coakley, C. A. (2006). The consequences of stereotype threat on the academic performance of White and non-White lower income college students. *Social Psychology of Education*, *9*, 341-357. doi: 10.1007/11218-005-

5456-6

- Kawakami, K., Dovidio, J. M., Hermsin, S., & Russin, A. (2000). Just say no (to stereotyping): Effects of training in the negation of stereotype associations on stereotype activation. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 78, 871-888. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.78.5.871
- Jones, J. M. (2009, November 24). *Obama's approval slide finds whites down to 39%*. Retrieved from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124484/obama-approval-slide-finds-whites-down-39.aspx>
- Judd, C. M., Park, B., Ryan, C. S., Brauer, M., & Kraus, S. (1995). Stereotypes and ethnocentrism: Diverging interethnic perceptions of African American and white American youth. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 460-481. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.69.3.460
- Levy, S., Stoessner, S., & Dweck, C. (1998). Stereotype formation and endorsement: The role of implicit theories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 330. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.74.6.1421
- Macrae, C. M., Milne, A.B., & Bodenhausen, G.V. (1994). Stereotypes as energy-saving devices: A peek inside the cognitive toolbox. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 37-47. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.66.1.37
- Myers, D. G. (2008). *Social Psychology* (9<sup>th</sup> ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 751-783. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751
- Poll, A. N. (2010, January 12-15). *Race and ethnicity*. Retrieved March 26, 2010, from

Pollingreport.com: <http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm> accessed 3/26/10

Sagar, A., & Schofield, J. W. (1980). Racial and behavioral cues in Black and White children's perceptions of ambiguously aggressive acts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(4), 590-598.

Shiv, B., & Fedorikhin, A. (1999). Heart and mind in conflict: The interplay of affect and cognition in consumer decision making. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26, 278-292.

Singh, R., Choo, W. M., & Poh, L. L. (1998). In-group bias and fair-mindedness as strategies of self-presentation in intergroup perception. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 147-162.